

9-1-1992

Democratic Dreams

Richard M. Valelly, '75

Swarthmore College, rvalell1@swarthmore.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-poli-sci>



Part of the [Political Science Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Richard M. Valelly, '75. (1992). "Democratic Dreams". *Boston Review*. Volume 17, Issue 5. 20-21.
<http://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-poli-sci/569>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Political Science at Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in Political Science Faculty Works by an authorized administrator of Works. For more information, please contact myworks@swarthmore.edu.

Democratic Dreams

Richard M. Valelly

The Death of An American Jewish Community: A Tragedy of Good Intentions

Hillel Levine and Lawrence Harmon

The Free Press, \$24.95

Hearing door chimes but not expecting visitors, Rabbi Gerald Zelermyer of southern Mattapan's Temple Beth Hillel in Boston opened the door of the temple's parsonage late one afternoon on June 27, 1969. He had just come home from a day of meetings with concerned African-American and white clergy from the Mattapan and Dorchester areas of Boston. The topic of their discussion was panic selling by whites in response to fears of minority influx. Standing in front of the 28 year-old rabbi were two young men, both black. One thrust a note toward the rabbi, who held it long enough to make out the words, "lead the Jewish racists out of Mattapan." Suddenly, the other threw acid into the rabbi's face. Had Rabbi Zelermyer not turned his face he would have been blinded for life.

Preparing for the next Sabbath in great physical and emotional pain, Rabbi Zelermyer wondered how Temple Beth Hillel would survive. The acid thrown in his face was a strike against the 300 families in the congregation and against their 5-day-a-week Hebrew school; the last such school in Boston, it served 125 children. He even speculated that real estate agents profiting from the panic selling had put his assailants up to the job.

Rabbi Zelermyer had been sucked into the violence surrounding neighborhood change in Roxbury, Mattapan, and Dorchester. That change began in the 1950s with the departure from Boston of a number of major, longstanding Jewish institutions. Temple Mishkan Tefila relocated from Roxbury, where it had been since 1925, to Newton. Hebrew Teacher's College moved to Brookline. An urban community that once numbered 82,000 in the 1940s shrank to about 53,000 by the 1950s and by the late 1960s was probably no larger than about 17,000. In the process the level of municipal services in Roxbury, Mattapan, and Dorchester dropped, intersecting a rising level of crime.

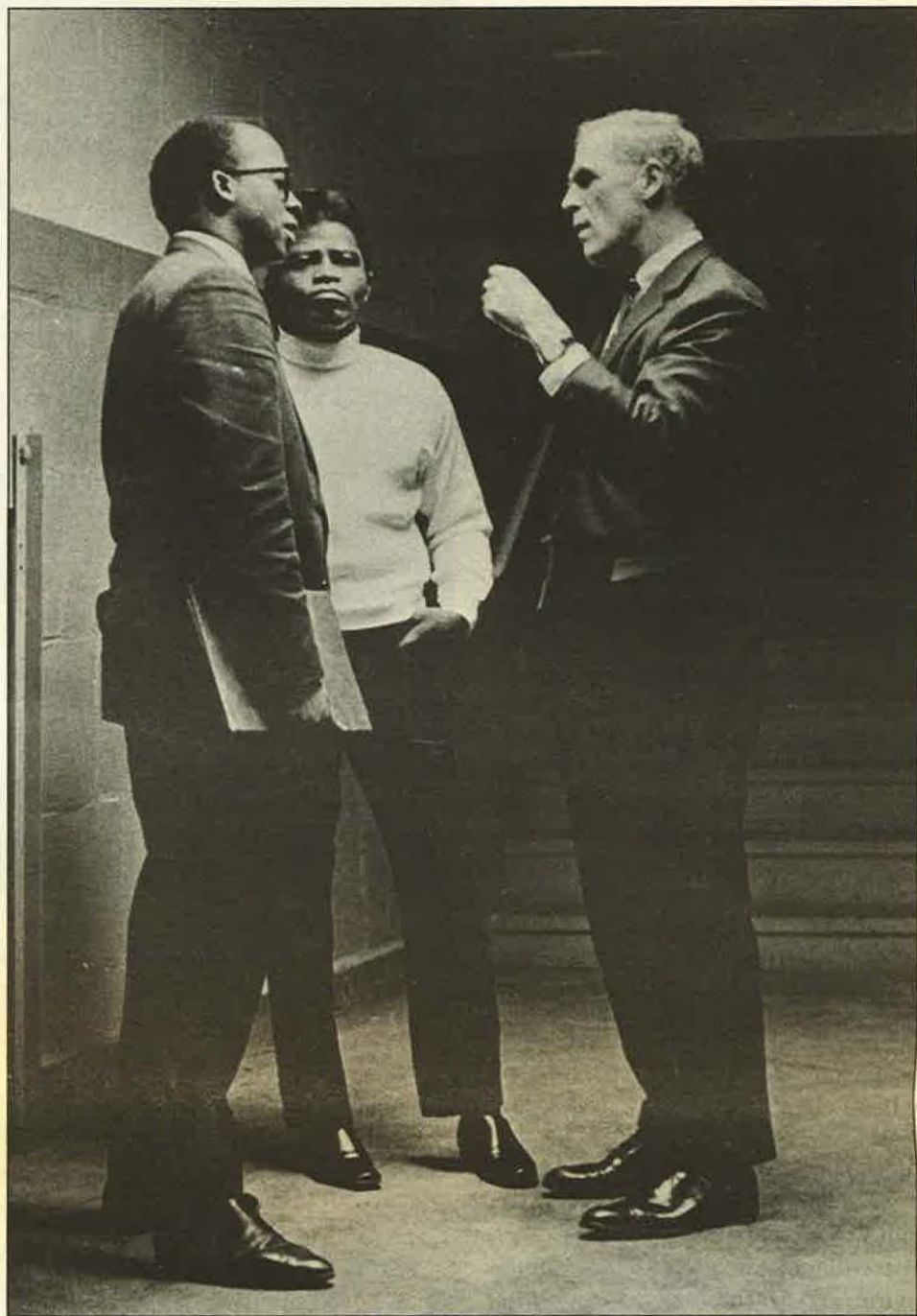
But many Jews remained in Mattapan (the precise numbers are a matter of controversy). And many who stayed hoped to build a special kind of Jewish community, a community based on black-Jewish

fraternity. They banded together to form the Mattapan Organization, a neighborhood association that sought to counter the panic selling encouraged by "block-busting" real estate agents who profited from racial conflict. A local Catholic priest and his parishioners helped as well. Both of the main partners in the alliance, Jews and blacks, sought decent houses and neighborhoods, both knew intimately the dark side of exclusion, many in each group recognized their common interests. Rabbi Zelermyer's guidance would have been a key part of a neighborhood democracy.

But by 1969 this experiment in democracy was doomed. Local schools were in utter disarray. Crime continued to rise. And the conviction was growing among the remaining Jewish residents that the time had come to cut losses and leave. Even before the attack on Rabbi Zelermyer the board of Temple Beth Hillel had secretly sold the temple to the City of Boston. By 1973 the painful displacement of the remaining, often elderly Jewish residents came to a close.

What can be said about such a sad story? That social change inevitably triggered black-Jewish tension? That the democratic dreams of Rabbi Zelermyer and the Mattapan Organization could never have worked? That people who are really different from each other can never share a neighborhood?

Democracy and the possibilities of fraternity should not be written off so quickly. That's the underlying message of *The Death of an American Jewish Community*, a poignant study of the demise of the Jewish community in Roxbury, Mattapan, and Dorchester by Hillel Levine, a Boston University sociologist, and Lawrence Harmon, former managing editor of the *Jewish Advocate*. Levine and Harmon devote considerable attention to criticizing mainstream Jewish leadership for running the government of Judaism undemocratically, and in the process betraying the Jews of Mattapan and Dorchester. But a key strength of their book lies beyond this critique. As Levine and Harmon tell their story, it becomes clear that things might have worked out differently and better. And that hopeful suggestion carries important lessons for us now.



City Councilor Thomas Atkins convinced Kevin White that tensions would escalate if the city cancelled a James Brown rock concert scheduled for the day after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr.

On the side of hope was the historic promise of the black-Jewish coalition. Founded in a mutual knowledge — and an egalitarian hatred — of political, social, and economic exclusion, the black-Jewish coalition has always symbolized democratic fraternity. Rabbis marched with Dr. King in Selma in 1965. Even today, the coalition continues to play a key political role in places as different as New York City and Louisiana.

Had the Mattapan Organization and its black allies succeeded, they could have shown how to make an integrated city neighborhood work while maintaining religious and ethnic diversity. To know what that success might have looked like, we need a good deal more information about the black side of the story in Mattapan and Dorchester. Here Levine and Harmon are, unfortunately, largely silent. They picture black rage and black teenage crime as if those responses exhausted black involvement in the history they describe. They offer quick portraits of Tom Atkins, Paul Parks, and

others, but their treatment of the black community has none of the depth and insight of their characterization of the Jewish community. Indeed, they hardly recognize it as a community. A second study, from the black side of the process, is waiting to be written.

Levine and Harmon are more successful, however, in their description of the pressures that helped to kill the ideal of inter-racial, neighborhood democracy.

The first pressure arose, ironically, from the government of Boston-area Judaism, for which Levine and Harmon have scathing criticism. Government by *makbers*, say the authors, lacks internal democracy, accountability, and debate. Their critique has not gone unmet — it was the centerpiece of the spirited, instructive exchange in the *Jewish Advocate* (March 27 - April 2, April 10 - 16, and May 1 - 7, 1992) between the authors and Gerald Gamm, an accomplished student of Boston social and political history who teaches at the University of Rochester. Gamm suggests that the nature of Jewish institutions determined

the leadership's behavior and the continuity of Jewish community through social change.

Still, Levine and Harmon insist, there were limits on the capacities of mainstream leadership to represent the aspirations of urban, working and middle-class Jews who cherished their neighborhoods. Heads of philanthropies and many others could have helped the

The second source of pressure came from bankers and other wealthy Boston elites.

working and middle-class Jews of Mattapan and Dorchester. But they did too little too late. According to Levine and Harmon, the roots of that failure lay in a combination of class bias, a fixation on the glories of the civil rights movement, a shallow optimism about the happy inevitability of suburbanization, and a belief that they knew best how to protect the Jewish community in a hostile world.

The second source of pressure came from bankers and other wealthy Boston elites. The analysis of the role played by these elites focuses on a private, federally-backed mortgage program. Announced in 1968, in the wake of Martin Luther King's assassination, the program was put together by B-BURG, the Boston Banks Urban Renewal Group. Levine and Harmon provide telling details about the people who established such organizations as B-BURG and The Vault, Boston's private business round table. While portraying themselves as statesmanlike emissaries from the private sector to a helpless public sector, they in fact come across as flawed, even narrow people. There were, of course, men and women of good will who sincerely believed that they were creatively solving social problems and adjusting conflict. But their capacity to address social ills was fatally undermined by their resistance to public accountability.

In response to private complaints, B-BURG made clear its wish for complete autonomy. So downtown bankers enforced a flawed mortgage program that was placed beyond democratic scrutiny. B-BURG redlined money into a small area of Boston, much of which somehow happened to be Jewish. The program in turn guaranteed blockbusting by unscrupulous real estate agents, a high rate of black bankruptcy (since no money for improvements was put aside, despite the deteriorated condition of the housing stock), and a level of disorder and crime that kept elderly Jews at home, in terror. The responsible "city fathers" in B-BURG turned a bundle off this ersatz integration. They made much

of their money from the federal government. The federal government — *our* federal government — underwrote losses via lucrative guarantees from the Federal Housing Authority. And in the end, ordinary people who happened to have different color skins and who happened to worship God differently suffered.

But who, exactly, placed B-BURG beyond public scrutiny? Here we come to the third obstacle to neighborhood democracy: the role of professional politicians in a basically conservative Democratic party. Boston's politicians, and their allies in the federal bureaucracy, prevented the intelligence of contentious, democratic politics from working its effects. No policy is perfect at inception, and each requires adjustment. But the absence of any debate about the policy's design made such adjustment impossible. In fact, the flaws in the B-BURG program were not pointed out until Senator Philip Hart of Michigan conducted a hearing on it in 1971. But by then it was simply too late.

Had there been political accountability — in short, had there been *democracy* — the Mattapan Organization might have survived. Others could have sprung up to work with it, led by activists such as Mel King (who briefly appears in the book, but with little analysis of his program), or Michael Ansara, who led Fair Share. The example of Fair Share is instructive in this connection. Building on the lessons of the limits of the B-BURG program, Fair Share set in place private limits to blockbusting in order to protect other integrated Boston neighborhoods. The Mattapan Organization and others could have played a similar role in implementing the B-BURG program, monitoring its effectiveness, and proposing improvements. But such roles required the democratic responsiveness that B-BURG insisted was impossible, and which City Hall did nothing to create. The result, instead, was the com-

plete dissipation of the associational energies which working and middle-class Jews and their black neighbors put into the Mattapan Organization. Without democracy, their fledgling commitments to each other died amid "For Sale" signs and daily crime.

In a 1987 interview with Levine and Harmon, former Boston mayor Kevin White speculated that pressure from the mainstream Jewish leadership would have given him the resources to proceed with instituting accountability. Far better that White and others had asked questions earlier. If a program like B-BURG's federally insured mortgage program was the quickest, most efficient way to meet black housing needs in Boston, then was it really necessary for B-BURG to have complete discretion? If B-BURG required federal guarantees, why couldn't politicians at the federal level — the Massachusetts congressional delegation, for instance — have demanded strong, substantive accountability in return?

So alternative policies were possible. Ultimately, however, the details of these alternatives are less important than the recognition that racial and ethnic divisions are simply not "natural" or inevitable, but are instead the product of social and political hierarchies. As such, those false social divisions can be overcome by people who genuinely care about democracy. Levine and Harmon offer a critical book, but it's not a complaining book. Instead it argues — though not as fully as one might like — that ethnic and racial fraternity are at once the cause and the consequence of democratic social policy.

Neighborhood democracy requires very hard work — but there were people who gave that kind of hard work. In a more democratic society their struggle just might have paid off. Next to the story that Levine and Harmon tell, in other words, is another story that *could*

have been told. They write their book so that the counterfactual story about the realization of democratic possibilities is always there, between the lines.

The actual history is truly tragic. blacks got lousy housing, Jews got hurt, though both wanted the same thing in the same place — a decent neighborhood. The other story, of what could have been, is encouraging. It is a vision of what America ought to be. We very much need a comparable vision to guide our national struggle both with the consequences of the growing political isolation of America's cities, and with the obstacles to building a working democracy — together. ☛

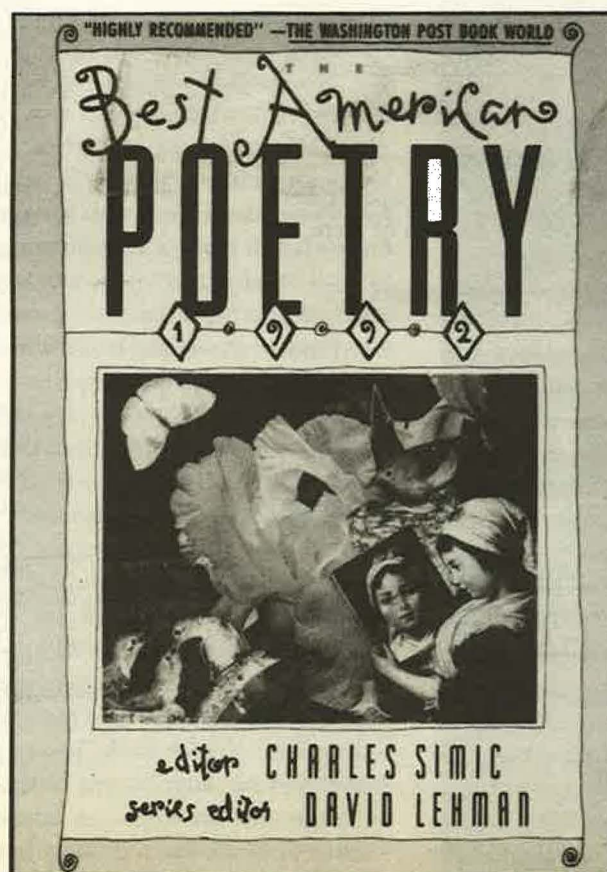
The *Boston Review* is pleased to announce its first annual

Short Story Contest

The winning entry will be published in the March 1993 issue of the *Review* and will receive a cash prize of \$300. All entrants will receive the March issue. The stories are not restricted by subject matter, should not exceed 4000 words, and should be previously unpublished. There is a \$5.00 processing fee, payable to the *Boston Review* in the form of check or money order. The deadline for submissions is January 31, 1993. Please address submissions to **Short Story Contest**. Stories will not be returned. The winner will be notified by mail. Send your entry to:

Short Story Contest
Boston Review
33 Harrison Ave.
Boston, MA 02111

The Review prides itself on judging the quality of the work, not the name or fame of the author.



"This series is the best hope we have for extending the [poetry] audience."

—Washington Post Book World

The fifth volume in a series that has "taken its place alongside America's most prestigious annuals" (*Cleveland Plain Dealer*) features seventy-five poets, half of whom appear here for the first time. In this year's edition, edited by Pulitzer Prize-winner Charles Simic, young voices are heard alongside those already well established to show the broad range of talent for which the series has been praised. With a foreword by David Lehman, an introduction by Charles Simic, and notes by the poets commenting on their work.

Available in both trade paperback and hardcover editions

At all bookstores or call 1-800-323-7445 to place your credit card order

COLLIER BOOKS • CHARLES SCRIBNER'S SONS
Imprints of Macmillan Publishing Company
866 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10022